

Frontier Fiesta

Don't worry about bitin' off more'n you can chew; your mouth is probably a whole lot bigger'n you think. - Cowboy Wisdom

In 1940, a group of students at the University of Houston started a tradition known as Frontier Fiesta. This annual event had variety shows performed by students and concerts and was intended to bring together University of Houston students and the Houston community. The tradition grew tremendously over the next few years and became hugely popular, and Houston mayors often declared "Fiesta City" as an official "town" for the week. Hollywood stars such as Humphrey Bogart, James Garner, Anne Baxter, Kenny Rogers, and Patsy Swayze¹ were attracted to the annual event. In 1958, *Life* magazine dubbed it, "The Greatest College Show on Earth". It also drew attention for only accepting Confederate money.

The Fiesta hit its peak around 1957 when over 100,000 people attended the 3-day event – however its growing popularity was to be its undoing. The annual tradition became too large and involved as the event was having a considerable impact academically for the students involved. Due to this, Frontier Fiesta was discontinued after the Frontier Fiesta of 1959. Certainly coincidentally, this demise occurred shortly after the Blackledge Twins last performed, during April of 1958 – the same year Kenny Rogers of Houston got his start as well.

¹ **Yvonne Helen "Patsy" Swayze** (*nee Karnes*; February 7, 1927 – September 16, 2013), a native of Houston, was an American film choreographer, dancer, and dance instructor. Her credits included the choreography for *Urban Cowboy*, *Liar's Moon* and *Hope Floats*. Her five children included the actors Patrick Swayze and Don Swayze. She has been credited with having trained Patrick in dance, leading to his starring role in *Dirty Dancing* in 1987.



In the photo above left, an Earl McMillan dealership Ford is shown – in 1949, the winner of the Famous Beard Growing Contest was awarded a brand new Ford truck by Earl McMillan. One of the main features of Frontier Fiesta was the variety shows. These shows, hosted by student groups, were 30 minute long shows that included singing and dancing. These shows were judged in an individual competition as groups competed for the coveted Joe Koppel Award (named for the second chairman of Frontier Fiesta in 1941), which was awarded to the best overall show for that year.

In addition to the show itself, the student groups constructed elaborate "fronts" which acted as an entrance to their tent for the performance. The fronts lined the main midway of Frontier Fiesta, effectively becoming "Fiesta City". They are usually constructed in a theme to match that of the show. For example, an Old West jailhouse may be the front for a show that centers around a jailbreak.

Frontier Fiesta was originally Western themed and most of the fronts and shows were done in an Old West style (country music and dancing were the norm). Patti and Penny performed in two shows, one in each of their last two years at Rice: "The Boy Friend" (featuring a Rice Professor) and a melodrama ("She Done Him Wrong"). Both were huge hits, as I remember – certainly seemed so to an awestruck 16 year old High School junior. I still remember one of the 'warm-up acts' – which I thought was real, when the MC toured the audience, interviewing 'random' attendees. One of these told the MC he was a painter. "What do you paint?" "Men and women." "Oh, so you're a portrait painter?" "No, I just paint 'MEN' on one door, and 'WOMEN' on the other."